Mendon Historical Society
Mendon, Massachusetts

FIRST SETTLERS OF MENDON Gordon L. Norton 1948

Having prepared no written speech for delivery at this annual meeting of the Mendon Historical Society, I shall address myself directly to the one sick member who is fortunate enough to miss what will probably be a very boring rehash of what you already know about Mendon's history.

In the first place, I am only interested in the first twelve years of the history of Mendon. The period from 1663 to 1675.

I chose Mendon and this part of its history because I wanted to study the birth and development of a typical New England community. This twelve year period offers all the courage, hardships, love and tragedy, of the seventeenth century rolled into a neat little bundle. It pulls people from the comforts of a civilized world and tosses them into the unconquered wilds of a new world, and then completely destroys everything they spend years in building up.

I want to know these people, who they were, where they came from, what they did, and where they went from here. I want to know their children, customs, and trials and tribulations. All this I want to know because, although I consider the Washingtons, Jeffersons, and Lincolns important milestones in our development, I still think these little underpublicized men were the builders of our nation.

The first point I w ish to present in the development of the Quinshipaug Plantation is a petition quoted by former historians. This misleading petition was made at Braintree in 1659: "Humbly desiring some relief relating to several families brought over by the owners of iron works." This led historians to believe that these original settlers of the town were relief cases.

The facts were, that in order to obtain a grant of one hundred and fifty acres of land, including a 30 acre house-lot, a settler had to bring with him, or put into the town, an estate valued at one hundred pounds. And in addition he had to be prepared to support a family until crops could be gathered from the newly cleared land.

These men came for homes and land on which to raise their families, and I have found no information which leads me to believe they were in need of WPA or any other outside assistance.

The first six arriving in '63 were, Fernando Thayer, George Aldrich, Daniel Lovett, John Moore, John Woodland, and John Harber.

These hardy men struggled through uncut forests from their homelands, bringing all their worldly belongings, including wives and children, to this new land. They settled and laid the ground work for the next group who probably arrived early in the spring of '64.

They were Joseph White, John Thompson, Walter Cook, Abraham Staples, John Gurney, John Rockwood, John Jepson, and Joseph Aldrich.

If we review a few of the individual cases we shall find that these men were substantial citizens of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and not relief cases. Fernando Thayer was a member of quite a tribe of well to do Thayers in Braintree and was well established when the Indians were still chasing rabbits over the hills of Mendon. He was a Freeman, and in order to hold that title, a man had to be a property owner and be a member of the church. In Mendon he was granted a forty acre house-lot, or two hundred acres in all, showing that his estate was above the average called for. An interesting side light on Fernando is the fact that historians have mistaken his name to mean that he was part Spanish. From the early arrival of his family in this country, it is very likely that his father was employed by Sir Fernando Gorges and that his son was named out of respect to him.

George Aldrich sailed from Derbyshire, England, on November 6th 1631, and after a brief stay at Dorchester, settled in Braintree. He was a tailor by trade. Who ever heard of the hands of a tailor plying the trade of an iron worker ? George sold his home in Braintree to Richard Thayer and joined the band moving out to Quinshipaug. He also had a forty acre house-lot.

Of the others, John Woodland's grant was thirty acre house-lot; Daniel Lovett, thirty-five acres; John Harber, thirty-five acres; and Walter Cook, forty acres. These house-lots were only a part of the full grant.

These men were definitely rugged individuals. John Moore, among the first six, had married his second wife in 1661. After moving to Mendon we find that his wife had a son in 1666, and that during the King Philip War he was ordered to Marlboro for supplies. He arrived at his destination, obtained the needed supplies, and on his way home in the dark of night, he fell from his horse, landed in a small river and received multiple bruises and a slight case of pneumonia. Shortly afterwards he moved to Medfield where he was wounded in an Indian attack on that town. This record would not be interesting except for the fact that he was eighty-five years of age at the birth of John junior, and was ninety-four on that ride through the jungles to Marlboro. Yes, he was a rugged individual.

And the women had to be rugged. The widow Grizell Gurney, step-mother of John Gurney, arrived in town shortly after John settled here. This rugged female pioneer, the ancestress of a former governor of Connecticut, in a period of twenty years outlived a total of five husbands. Proving that she was indeed a rugged individual.

Unlike today, the seventeenth century was a man's world, so completely that records tell us almost nothing of the women who fought and suffered with those men in building up our nation. But a review of the facts will show that they bore an equal share of the hardships and trials of a new world.

Huldah, the wife of Fernando Thayer, came into the wilderness with five children, and in a period of twenty-four years, she gave the new land a total of twelve children, an average of one every two years. To face a wilderness and deliver that many children required real courage.

Her first daughter, Sarah, married Joseph Stevens, the first blacksmith of Mendon. In '77 Joe died at Braintree, leaving Sarah with three small daughters.

Samuel Hayward, visiting his sister Mrs Fernando Thayer, met and married Mehitable Thompson, the daugher of our well known John. Sam settled at Mendon and added another family to the population.

Catherine, the wife of George Aldrich, was married only two years when they sailed from England. She came into the wilderness of Quinshipaug with five children and produced a total of ten.

Johanna, wife of Daniel Lovett, brought five children with her. She suffered the heartache of Mendon's first tragedy, when her son John, who was eleven or twelve years of age, fell from a horse and was killed, on Sunday July 26, 1668. But the following year she had the pleasure of a double wedding in her family. Her son James married Hannah Tyler and her daughter Mary married Hopestill Tyler. Both weddings took place on the same day before a magistrate at Medfield.

Mary, the wife of Abraham Staples, came to Mendon practically a bride, and deleivered her first child without the aid of a modern maternity ward.

The Middlesex County Records credit this child, Abraham Junior, with being the first child born at Mendon. According to these records he was born on June 14, 1663. But according to other records Abraham's

grant was renewed on December 30th, 1663, indicating that he had not lived at Mendon up to this time. Mr. Metcalf also failed to list him among the first group of arrivals. If the birth occurred in 1664 instead of '63, then Thomas Thayer, who was born on February 14, 1664, was the first child born here. The first girl was Priscilla Rockwood, who was born on April 10th, 1664.

The Middlesex County Records were not too complete and the Suffolk County Records were either not kept at all, or they have been lost. But from what we have to work on, it appears that during this period from 1663 to 1675, twenty-three boys and twelve girls were born at Mendon. The good Lord seemed to recognize the need for men to build this new community.

When the Indians attacked the town in 1675, there were approximately forty-two adult males, thirty-two wives, and eighty-three children in town. A total of one hundred and fifty-seven persons.

Although the Indians had already wrecked havoc on Swansea in Plymouth Colony in June of '75, it was not until July 14th that the first attack occurred in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. And Mendon was the scene of this attack. The redskins took the settlers by surprise and left at least six or seven dead on the field of battle. In the turmoil our town fathers forgot to record the names of those slain, but from various sources we have been able to piece together some of the story.

Richard Post was elected Constable of Mendon in 1674 and remained in that capacity in '75. According to an ancient history, he was the first man killed in the Bay Colony, and therefore had to be the first victim at Mendon on July 14th.

Among the other victims were: Mrs. Rachel Puffer and her oldest son, Joseph, a lad of about twelve years; John Rockwood Junior, another lad of twelve. It seems quite evident that John Albee, who married Jane Holbrook in '71, was another victim. Ballou says that Jane then took her four children and fled. John Gurney must have been the sixth person on this list, as his wife went back to Braintree as a widow with Mathias Puffer. The town of Mendon stands as a monument to these victims of a cruel fight between the red and the white man for supremacy.

The war continued and by the latter part of September the population had shrunk to 19 men, 5 of whom were "very old." Still these hardy men held no real hatred for their red brother. At a time when the rest of the Colony was clamoring for the scalps of the redmen, Mendon sent the Rev. Joseph Emerson and Fernando Thayer to Boston as a committee to obtain permission to bring into town the Praying Indians of Grafton. They wanted them to build a fort and live in the town until the war was over, but unfortunately permission was granted too late. The followers of Philip had coerced the Grafton Indians into his ranks or made them prisoners.

No one knows when the last inhabitant left the town, but Joseph White, being the sergeant in command of the local garrison, was probably among the last.

No definite date has been left to us of the destruction of the town but it is quite evident that this occurred around the first of February in 1676. Tradition tells us that the house of Joseph Aldrich was spared because he was a Quaker. I doubt this as I have found no indication that a house was left standing and further the records show that Joseph was a member in good standing of the church of Mendon. Therefore, he could not have been a Quaker.

In closing this discussion of the early settlers I attach a list as complete as I have been able to make it of the settlers and the approximate time of their arrival in town.

MENDON RESIDENTS IN ORDER OF THEIR SETTLING FROM 1663 to 1675

1.	Fernando Thayer	1663
2.	George Aldrich	"
3.	Daniel Lovett	"
4.	John Moore	"
5.	John Woodland	"
6.	John Harber	"
7.	Joseph White	1664
8.	John Thompson Sr.	"
9.	Walter Cook	"
10.	Abraham Staples	"
11.	John Gurney	"
12.	John Rockwood	"
13.	John Jepson	"
14.	Joseph Aldrich	"
15.	Benjamin Albee	1664-67
16.	Col. William Crowne	"
17.	John Rayner	"
18.	Thomas Barnes	"
19.	Samuel Read	"
20.	Grizell Gurney	"
21.	Joseph Juell	"
22.	Thomas Juell	"
23.	Samuel Spencer	"
24.	Samuel Hayward	"
25.	Mathias Puffer	1668
26.	Gregory Cook	"
27.	Stephen Cook	"
28.	Joseph Stevens	1669
29.	Peter Aldrich	"
30.	Job Tyler	"
31.	Hopestill Tyler	"
32.	John Aldrich	"
33.	John Parris	"
34.	John Thompson Jr.	"
35.	William Holbrook	"
36.	Rev. Joseph Emerson	"
37.	John Sprague	1671
38.	John Albee	"
39.	James Albee	"
40.	Simeon Peck	1673
41.	Richard Post	1674
42.	James Lovett	"
43.	John Bartlett	"